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Introduction: Symposium on the 2022 Dakar Declaration

The second edition of the Conference on Economic and Monetary Sovereignty of Africa was held in Dakar, Senegal, on October 25–28, 2022. Participants from around the world debated the theme “Facing the Socio-Ecological Crisis: Delinking and the Question of Global Reparations.” The event was designed as a follow-up on discussions begun during the first edition (held in Tunis in 2019; see Ben Gadha et al. 2021), as well as an opportunity to reflect on recent developments.

The COVID-19 pandemic and its economic and health consequences have brought back to the fore the issue of *delinking*, a concept that refers to the need for global South countries to emancipate themselves from the economic structures bequeathed by colonialism and renewed forms of dependence (Amin 1990). Indeed, the marginalization of the countries of the South, and particularly of Africa, from access to vaccines against COVID-19, and the entry of these countries into a new cycle of indebtedness in foreign currency, have brutally reminded them of the need to attain more economic and monetary sovereignty in the face of the failing support of the global North. However, this longstanding goal has become more complicated to achieve in the current context of environmental stress: it is increasingly recognized that past economic models based on the exploitation of fossil fuels are not sustainable, and even constitute a threat to humanity.

How can we reconcile the desire for autonomy of the countries of the South in an asymmetric and unequal world with the ecological transition agenda? This is where the issue of reparations comes in: on the one hand, as an instrument to correct climate injustices (the historically least polluting nations are those that suffer the most from the effects of climate change), development inequalities (created by slavery, colonialism, and imperialism), and racial inequalities in the countries of the North; and on the other hand, as a transfer of resources that allows the countries of the South to adapt to climate change and move toward greener economic models (Darity and Mullen 2021; Perry 2021; Táiwò 2022; Obeng-Odoom 2023).

The Dakar Declaration is one of the main byproducts of four days of intense, fruitful, and comradely debates on the triptych of delinking, socio-ecological resilience, and reparations. It is an internationalist manifesto and a global action plan.

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The backdrop to this document of less than eight hundred words is the observation that humanity is living in a critical period. The capitalist system, after five centuries of bumpy evolution, seems to have reached a point of no return. Multifaceted crises—climatic, socioeconomic, financial, sanitary, military, and so on—are interlocking in a perilous whirlpool. If they spare no part of the globe, their most devastating consequences are suffered above all by the nationals of the global South, by racial minorities and Indigenous peoples in the countries of the North, and by the women who, everywhere, ensure the care work essential to social reproduction.

Regrettably, the need and urgency for collective action is hampered by the myopia of a historically dominant Western bloc that is entangled in growing rivalries with reemerging powers like China and Russia. In our Gramscian present, where humanity is moving halfway between a dying world and a new world that is slow to appear, the “monsters” do not hesitate to take advantage of the chiaroscuro.

Yet, according to the sixty signatories of the Dakar Declaration, the point is to get out of this chiaroscuro. More than ever, it appears necessary and urgent to work to bring about a multipolar world system that respects the sovereignty of peoples and that is committed to repairing the past and present injustices that sustain naturalized systems of privilege and domination. Obviously, these demands and aspirations are structural and long-lasting ones to the extent that they have regularly surfaced during periods of crisis. As such, they resonate with the defunct New International Economic Order (NIEO), the G77 (or “Third Worldist”) agenda at the United Nations that will celebrate its fiftieth anniversary next year. At that time, the West reacted to this antisystemic move by imposing “structural adjustment” policies over most countries in Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Asia. Their destructive economic and human impacts have been well studied since then. Given the current global debt distress prompted by the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, past “mistakes” should certainly not be repeated.

The signatories of the Declaration are aware that the necessary and desirable changes require an internationalist front line that unfolds at several levels—local, national, regional, and global—and that articulates counterprojects anchored in imaginaries and epistemes that challenge the status quo defended by entrenched hegemonic powers.

To push forward its “concrete utopia,” the Declaration sets out ten yardsticks of action:

- Democratize our states—in the North and in the South
- Adopt economic models that value local human and material resources
- Build regional alliances
- Defend a new multilateralism with more inclusive and democratic global institutions
- Resist militarism and imperialism
- Overcome global inequality and volatility in the world economy
- Put an end to recurrent debt crises
- End the financial hemorrhaging of Africa by transnational corporations
- Defend a global reparations agenda
- Mobilize for change

Crucially, the “concrete utopia” project needs to challenge the main force weighing in favor of the status quo, the global political project usually described under the name of neoliberalism. To be

successful, such a political move requires, on the epistemic front, unveiling the ideological nature of the relationships between state, markets, and society that it assumes and tends to naturalize. In contrast to the fictions of neoclassical economics, really existing neoliberalism has never been about the erosion of the role of the state in favor of frictionless and self-regulating markets (Slobodian 2018). To debunk the chimera of *laissez-faire*, which effaces unequal power relations within the economy, an alternative to neoliberalism needs to begin with the understanding that law and politics construct markets. As Karl Polanyi has showed, *laissez-faire* does not involve the removal of politics from the economy but is a political reconfiguration of the latter (Polanyi [1944] 2001). This institutional hardwiring distributes unequal relations of power within markets as the American Legal Realist and institutional economist Robert Lee Hale argued (Samuels 1972; Hale 1923; Kennedy 1991).

In order to highlight these aspects and deepen some of the themes of the Declaration, some of the signatories thought it would be useful to organize a symposium. Two themes were selected: the legal case for reparations; and the political economy of financial delinking through monetary unification.

In his contribution, Professor Franklin Obeng-Odoom confronts a set of thorny issues: How could Africans today claim reparations for the enslavement of their ancestors and their deportation abroad? Could the principle of retroactivity be applied to such “distant” events? What would be the legal basis of such claims given that slavery was not illegal in the slaver countries and that some Africans were complicit in the Atlantic slave trade? To address such questions and frequent objections from conservative scholars, Obeng-Odoom engages with the work of Nora Wittmann, an author who provided convincing counterarguments based on an original investigation of the nature and content of “international law” at that time. As Obeng-Odoom argues, Wittmann’s scholarship could be further extended in a way that would provide a stronger and general legal case for various reparations claims.

Among the other topics discussed during the Dakar conference was how the African continent could achieve collective self-reliance. In her contribution, Carla Coburger addresses this issue with regard to the current regional and continental monetary unification projects. From a Pan-Africanist perspective, using the same currency across different political boundaries might seem desirable, as it would symbolize African unity and probably cement the continent’s global power. However, we should never forget the fact that currency unions are, foremost, political projects. Depending on how they are designed, according to Coburger, they might be instruments to entrench hierarchies and class war. Reflecting on the case of the eurozone, the sole existing currency union created after the end of formal colonialism, she warns of the dangers of monetary unification projects modeled on the euro. If African countries are not ready for a full monetary integration, one based on political federalism and fiscal union, they should opt for regional settlement systems.

As the two contributors make clear, the road to substantive, “world-systemic” change is not blocked by the lack of acceptable, achievable, and far-reaching proposals. Rather, progressive forces everywhere must overcome the weight of political inertia, cemented in enduring legal and institutional practices, while avoiding both the demons of division and the attraction of false or unconsidered solutions. Though the seemingly unassailable global status quo might feed motives for despair and civic retreat, the success of progressive forces will ultimately depend on their capacity to sustain the optimism of humanity’s collective will against the backdrop of humanity’s usual intellectual pessimism. The Dakar Declaration is grounded in such an ethical commitment.

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